DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 727 CS 215 025

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TITLE The Use of Personal Narratives, Literature, and Journals to Foster Caring in Nursing Students.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; Behavior Development; *Caregiver Role; Course Content; Higher Education; *Journal Writing; *Nursing Education; *Student Attitudes; *Student Journals
IDENTIFIERS *Caring; Reading Thinking Relationship; *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

A study examined caring attitudes in nursing students, specifically how students ranked characteristics of caring behavior, how the reading of personal narratives and literary works dealing with caring influenced caring behavior, and, how keeping a personal journal influenced caring behavior. Subjects were nine students in a seminar entitled "Exploring Personal and Professional Issues in Cancer Nursing through Writing." Data sources were a pre- and a posttest, journal entries, and open-ended interviews. Findings suggest that students perceived the assigned readings as beneficial in providing models of caring nursing behavior in difficult situations. Excerpts from student journals show that feelings could be explored more deeply in writing than in conversation. The seminar on writing was able to reach all participants and integrate effectively various levels of nursing knowledge, nursing behavior, and life experiences with the prescribed course content. Nursing students need to be provided with intentional pauses in their often technologically oriented studies. Narratives and other forms of literature, in connection with writing, can become significant tools for students to explore nursing issues such as caring. Students should be provided with a different model of real nursing situations to place their acquired textbook knowledge into context. (Contains 38 references.) (PA)

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ED 386 727

THE USE OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES, LITERATURE, AND JOURNALS TO FOSTER CARING IN NURSING STUDENTS

This paper presents findings from a study of caring attitudes in nursing students. Part I discusses the literature review, goals, subjects, techniques, and data. Part II presents findings and discussion. Finally, part III concludes with recommendations for teaching and research.

PART I

Literature Review

Discussions of caring and its importance for nursing abound; see, for example, Benner, 1984, 1989; Cooper, 1989; Henderson, 1989; Watson, 1979, 1985, 1987). In defining caring behavior as "central to human expertise, to curing and to healing" (ix), P. Benner and J. Wrubel (1989) attest to its crucial role in nursing. At the same time, caring is difficult to teach and assess. Various instruments exist that attempt to measure attitudes toward caring and similar concepts (Ward and Fettler, 1979). Yet, as Rosenthal (1989) points out, such instruments lack context and may be unduly influenced by factors surrounding their administration. J. Watson (1988) criticizes nursing education for stressing rational and objective models of education and argues for a new nursing pedagogy which examines "concepts of caring . . . perhaps including development of courses using art, music, literature, poetry, drama, and movement as means of examining subjective responses to health and illness" (424).

Several researchers encourage the use of literature and writing in nursing education. Young-Mason (1988) and Younger (1990) perceive literature as "mirror to compassion" and "mode of knowing" respectively. Bartol (1986) encourages creative literature "to gain insight into human behavior in the face of illness" (21). Finally, in the wake of the writing across the curriculum movement, writing as a form of learning has been discussed in the nursing literature, particularly as practiced through journal keeping (Allen, Bowers, and Diekelmann, 1989; Burnard, 1987; Chinn, 1988; Devlin and Slaninka, 1981; Hahnemann, 1986; Pinkava and Haviland, 1984; Pinkstaff, 1985). Throughout the review of the literature, however, no studies were found that combined the acknowledged value of personal narratives, literature, and journal writing as method to foster development of caring behavior. We believe that our study makes an attempt to close this gap.

Goals

Our research addressed development of caring behavior and the

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possibility of fostering such behavior in a nursing class on cancer care. In particular, we wanted to examine if and how the study of personal narratives and literature, in connection with keeping a reflective journal, contributed to the growth and/or modification of caring behavior. Specifically, our study asked these questions:

1. What characteristics of caring behavior do nursing students identify? How do students rank these characteristics?

2. How does the reading of personal narratives and literary works dealing with caring influence students' caring behavior?

3. How does keeping a journal influence students' caring behavior?

Sample and Subjects

For our study we chose a junior level elective seminar: "Exploring Personal and Professional Issues in Cancer Nursing Through Writing." It met during the summer of 1990 three times weekly for four weeks. Demographics of the nine participants reflected the diversity of today's nursing students:

1. two juniors, seven seniors; their ages ranging from 22 to 38;
2. seven white, one Philippino, one Black;
3. four male, five female;
4. three unmarried, living at home; five married with children; one single parent.
5. six working, two outside of nursing, four as nursing assistants.

Design

Our exploratory and descriptive study utilizes the ethnographic techniques for studying Nursing Education described by Rosenthal (1989). Rosenthal believes that the ethnographic approach is well suited to research in professional education because of its sensitivity to process. Ethnography includes the lived experience within a context, ranges over a period of time, searches for patterns of development and meaning, uses observation, description, and interviews, with the latter often based on questions generated by subjects' responses, and presents findings in form of a narrative.

Data Sources

To increase the validity of the study, three data sources were used: (1) a pre- and post test; (2) journal entries; and (3)

open-ended interviews. The pre- and post-test had students list and rank characteristics and actions of a caring person. Structured and free journal entries asked students to respond to narratives by nurses, patients, family members, and Leo Tolstoy's novella, Death of Ivan Ilych. These texts epitomized aspects and dilemmas in caring--caring too much, not caring enough, caring for various patients, some of whom were dying. Structured journal entries asked students to side with or against various caregivers, to interpret patients' fears, or, in the case of the Tolstoy novella, to develop a care plan for Ivan. In additional entries, students were encouraged to write freely about feelings, thoughts, and previous experiences stirred up by readings and class discussions. Finally, open-ended interviews served to cross-check researchers' interpretation of students' writings and class contributions. Questions based on journal entries enabled personalized, natural dialogues between researcher and interviewed student.

Data Collection and Analysis

Pre- and post-tests, which listed and ranked characteristics and activities of a caring person, were analyzed and grouped into common categories. Journal entries were read for descriptions and discussions of caring behavior. Findings were then cross-checked through additional questions and the taped interviews. In addition, interviews and journal entries were analyzed rhetorically by looking at word choices, pauses, emphases, and coherence.

PART II: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: Pre- and Post-Tests: What characteristics of caring behavior do nursing students identify? How do they rank them?

The pre- and post-test asked students to list and rank characteristics and activities of a caring person and then to explain their ranking. In general, the post-test revealed that students' lists became more specific and attuned to nursing care than to care in general. For example, Jay's first list characterized a caring person as follows:

* They are very dedicated to this attitude
* This person would do anything possible to help
* They are very loving toward themselves and others
* Very open and honest

Jay's posttest list contained these elements: Such a person

* Listens well
* Responds to cues, verbal and nonverbal
* Take[s] that extra effort to see that things are done

right
* [Serves as] patient advocate

Another general feature of students' tests was the shift from characteristics that described caring actions to labels that denoted caring attitudes, the basis from which caring behavior emmanates. In fact, by choosing the terms "listening" and being "non-judgmental" as labels best describing caring, students echoed Watson's description of caring (Watson NLN Pub. 15-2236). She writes:

> The ideal and value of caring is a starting point, a stance, an attitude, which has to become a will, an intention, a commitment, and a conscious judgment that manifests itself in concrete acts. (31)

Research Question 2: Reading of Personal Narratives and Literature: How does the reading of personal narratives and literature dealing with caring influence students' caring behavior?

Reading personal narratives and literary works influenced students' attitudes toward caring significantly, a point we want to demonstrate through individual student profiles and an overall assessment of the benefits of this teaching method.

The profiles deal with two students' responses to the assigned readings, Jessica and Kris's. Jessica's case presents the nursing student caught in the well-known conflict of personal versus professional care while Kris's profile demonstrates the beneficial and change-creating impact of life experience in connection with a course that values and integrates such personal contributions.

Jessica

At age 22, Jessica seemed the traditional nursing student--she was female, lived at home, and entered nursing directly out of high school. When we met her, Jessica had been working for about 1 1/2 years as a nursing assistant in a general medical/surgical area at a children's hospital. Just recently, she had transferred to the hospital's pediatric intensive care unit.

Though she found the work in ICU taxing, Jessica clearly enjoyed it because she loved children: "I didn't know what I was expecting. . . . I didn't realize the kids were so sick, basically, but I really enjoy it."

Despite her enjoyment, however, Jessica struggled with a basic caring issue: the conflict between emotional involvement and professional effectiveness--or in Jessica's own words: "I am scared that caring will interfere with my professional care." Also, Jessica feared that involvement might lead to potential burn-out while detachment might foster empty technical competency. She saw nurses around her demonstrating various levels of burn-out:

> I think I have seen a lot of nurses who . . . get emotionally involved in all these kids and they get burned out real quick

and they move on to different jobs. . . . You see those other nurses who don't care about anything. . . I hope I don't get like that. I think they cared at one time."

Observing these role models frightened Jessica:

I myself do the same thing [get involved] and it bothers me . . . because I am going to get burned out and . . . I'm going to get real, real bad hurt one day and I am just going to quit nursing.

The phrases "that bothers me," getting "hurt real bad," "confused," "real upset," "it's not fair," "the big thing with me is the pain" appeared frequently in Jessica's writings and her interview. One narrative character with whom Jessica associated most was a nurse unable to face a dying teenage patient. Jessica writes: "**I feel closest to Michelle** because I've been hurt before." Though the story provided no clues as to Nurse Michelle's distancing, Jessica got very animated and determined that the nurse had been hurt:

Oh, she had to have been. . . . If you haven't been hurt before, you are going to jump right in . . . cause I did this. . . . And you're going to get attached to these people without knowing you are and then all of a sudden you get hurt and then I think you shy away from it, and that's why I think she was staying outside.

Jessica seemed to be the most conflict-ridden student in the class. In her case, the readings provided Jessica with alternatives to burnout and quitting and modeled that caring and professionalism could complement each other. Journal writing allowed explorations of feelings Jessica previously had kept to herself. Jessica acknowledged that most of the readings dealt with nurses who at first "shied away" from emotional involvement but grew professionally as well as personally through getting close. She writes, "It helps that someone else can do it." When one character says that death can bring blessings, Jessica commented, "It really helps to hear that." Another time she said, "I wish I wouldn't have got hurt so bad in the process. . . . At least . . . I can get good out of it and hurt at the same time instead of just hurting and not getting anything out of it."

Kris

Kris was 33 years old and married. Many in his family belonged to medical professions. Kris chose nursing after having been a respiratory therapist for several years.

At the time of the study, Kris was a senior. He had always considered himself a caring person, stating emphatically in the interview: "Yes, yes . . . that's one reason I went to nursing because I feel I do care about people." According to Kris caring was not an "innate quality" but a quality one developed: "It's all your life experiences."

For Kris the life experience that profoundly affected his attitude toward caring, and carried over into his nursing prac-

tice, was his mother's suffering and death from ovarian cancer during our summer seminar. Her illness added a special layer of meaning to the readings and writings the course forced Kris to do. At first Kris did not disclose his mother's illness until encouraged, by a teacher-generated journal response, to connect personal experiences with an exploration of patients's dignity. From then on he shared his feelings with the journal and thus with his teachers. Two days before the class ended, Kris also told his classmates: "I had to reveal it because . . . we are talking about caring." Kris realized, and then acknowledged in the interview, that the class--the readings, and the journal entries--allowed him to recognize and confront the denial of his mother's illness and impending death.

One reading, in particular, affected Kris's caring attitudes powerfully. The story about Lara, a twelve-year old leukemia victim--contained in Benner's Primacy of Caring (1989)--almost made Kris break down in class. According to him, Lara's story showed "actual empathy," to Kris a primary characteristic of a caring person. Trying to find meaning in his mother's death, Kris remembered Nurse Robin's words and noted them in his journal: "If there is ever any sense to be made of losing a loved one, perhaps it lies in the inexplicable gifts one receives along the way" (302).

The "inexplicable gifts" translated for Kris into the "many things that people did for us throughout the ordeal," leading him to emphasize in his own nursing care the "little things" that often mean so much to the patient in need of help. Thus the readings helped Kris resolve the personal issue of his mother's dying which in turn led to a change in his care for patients. Although Kris had seen many patients die, they had always remained strangers. Now, through his mother's illness and death, and the reflections imposed by the course, the distance between him as the caregiver and his patients lessened. Asked whether the experience at home carried over into his own nursing, Kris was emphatic:

> Oh, yes, yes, it does. . . . I am in a nursing home . . . and I see these old people and it kind of relates back to my mom and my dad. I just realized my dad is 70 years old and gosh he could be in a nursing home too.

In the interview, Kris dwelled on the "little things" he now attends to more often:

> What I do is just sit back and talk to them so you know it's little old things like getting this, . . . getting them some water, . . . [wheeling them] to the bathroom. . . . To [them] it [is] really something. Something important.

Readings: General Assessment

Overall, students perceived the assigned readings as beneficial in at least four ways: (1) Repeatedly students saw readings as models of caring nursing behavior in difficult situations. One student wrote: "They give me ideas of how to handle future patients I will have." (2) Readings allowed students to vicariously experience other nursing situtations and various ways of

caring for a multitude of patients and their families. (3) In presenting the affective and cognitive side of nursing, personal narratives and literature acknowledged a side of nursing that students perceive as real but neglected in nursing education. (4) The assigned readings facilitated students' relating to course material since they often touched deeply students' personal experiences.

Question 3: Journal Writing: How does keeping a journal influence students' caring behavior?

Reflective journal entries about readings and class discussion helped faciliate important connections between nursing requirements and student experiences. Journal writing also allowed students to write about experiences they could not share with others. In some instances, it even helped students to cope with difficult nursing situtations. Thus in a questionnaire about the required journal entries, all students agreed that journal writing helped them examine their attitudes about caring; seven students thought that the journals increased their appreciation of caring in nursing while five saw a change in their ideas about caring. In the interview, one student admitted that she had never thought about caring before this class while three insisted that journal writing--although a beneficial tool to clarify caring issues--did not change their way of caring. One student felt that writing brought out "something that . . . may have been hidden," and for at least one other student the writings led to a kind of epiphany, a sudden insight into his current nursing practice that included the family as much as the patient. Remembering an incident from the past during which he helped taking a dying woman to emergency surgery, this student wrote:

> As we all crowded into the elevator . . . hanging onto the bed with all the equipment, each of us concentrating on our jobs, the doors started to close. As I looked out through the closing doors, I saw her husband and teenage son crying, watching what everyone was sure to be her last trip anywhere. They bothered me. That made me realize that this wasn't just a dying women, but a dying family. She did die on the operating table. I transported her to the morgue, all the time thinking not of her but of her family. What could I have done for them?

In summary, our class provided a pause in students' technologically and scientifically oriented nursing studies. Because this class addressed students individually through journal writing, it was able to reach all participants and integrate effectively various levels of nursing knowledge, nursing behavior, and life experiences with the prescribed course content.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Teaching

1. Students need to be provided with intentional pauses in

their often technologically oriented studies.

2. Narratives, and other forms of literature, in connection with writing, can become significant tools for students to explore nursing issues such as caring.

3. Because classes need to give students the opportunity to react vicariously to and explore a variety of caring situations not found generally in the classroom, students must be provided with a different model of real nursing situations in order to place their acquired textbook knowledge into context, as early in their education as possible.

4. Nursing classes need to utilize the life experiences of students in order to make taught material meaningful.

Research

Our study was limited by its short duration and small student sample. Longitudinal studies of individuals and/or groups--at least one regular semester or a study involving the entire academic nursing program and practice--need to be undertaken to fully explore the implications of a pedagogy that uses a combination of narratives, literature, and journal writing to foster caring in Nursing students.

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